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The Nature of Spiritual Experience

ABSTRACT

This article surveys the question of how early Protestantism was experienced by its practitioners, using the perspective of the history of emotions. It argues that justification by faith derived its power from its emotional impact, and that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, too, could be emotionally attractive and absorbing as well as, to some, repellent. It considers how Protestant spiritual experience varied during the life-course from childhood to old age. It argues that doctrinal controversies, notably those over the Eucharist, were decisively shaped by emotional and experiential factors. It argues that the Protestant encounter with the Bible was itself experiential, based on what Calvin called the 'feeling' that the Bible's authority is self-authenticating. It concludes by suggesting that historians need to attend to devotion in the daily lives of ordinary believers as well as to polemics and controversies.

KEYWORDS

Bible, Childhood, Devotion, Emotion, Eucharist, Justification, Predestination

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Introduction

The theological history of the Reformation has focused on what doctrines the various theologians taught, how they arrived at them and how they differed from one another, subjects which we now understand to an impressively high level. We have made less progress on the related subject of why so many sixteenth century people, both learned and unlearned, cared so deeply about these doctrines. The question of how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century believers experienced and felt their religion is of course unanswerable, but it can seem like a Rosetta stone capable of unlocking almost everything we might need to understand about the period. If not that, it is at least an indispensable element of any analysis of the Reformation.

This is, in other words, a question not only for historical theology but also for a much newer discipline, the history of the emotions. This is a field with which historians of religion have been surprisingly slow to engage. It arose from literary scholarship, where so-called ‘new historicist’ literary critics found they needed to find ways of handling inner experience in ways which were sensitive to how it can be shaped or even determined by historical context. This gave rise to programmatic works such as Jerome Kagan’s *What is Emotion? History, Measures and Meanings* (2007), and pathbreaking collections of essays such as Gail Kern Paster et al. (eds), *Reading the Early Modern Passions* (2004). A parallel interest in the emotions from anthropologists of religion provided some theoretical underpinning. Historians have been ready to follow where these disciplines have lead, tackling the thorny issue of just what emotions, passions, affections and feelings were understood to be in the period, and bringing these new methods to bear on key texts, such as the works of the medical philosopher Thomas Burton. Surprisingly, however, historians of religion have not been at the front of the queue. Attempts to apply the history of the emotions to the Reformation remain in their infancy. The ground has been broken by Susan Karant-Nunn’s *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (2010); my own *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (2013) has also tried to apply some of these methods. This chapter can do little more than sketch out some of the simplest contours of the terrain, in the hope that, in due course, more assiduous emotional mapmakers will find where the treasures are hidden.

Being justified by faith alone

The distinction between emotions and intellect, between ‘head’ and ‘heart’, seems self-evident to modern eyes, but only emerged in its modern form during the seventeenth century. The *heart*, from late antiquity to the Renaissance and beyond, was the seat of the will and of the intellect as well as of the affections. In the Christian humanist milieu out of which the Protestant Reformation emerged, the affections were not anti-rational or sub-rational, but an essential part of rationality. Rhetoric, the pre-eminent humanist art form, is fundamentally a matter of engaging the passions in the service of a rational end. For all the Renaissance humanists’ reverence for the ancient world, they universally reviled the Stoic belief that one ought to rise above the passions and attain indifference to them.¹ Transcending the passions was not merely impossible, but, for the disciples of a Lord who had wept at his friend’s tomb and sweated blood in his own torment, repugnant. Protestantism grew up in a context in

¹ Richard Strier, ‘Against the Rule of Reason’ in Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd-Wilson (eds), *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 23-8.

which the emotions were expected to be disciplined, cultivated, channelled, purified and then pursued to a pitch of intensity.

Hence the unabashedly passionate nature of so much of Martin Luther's writing. Although most other reformers were more restrained, his style was not a mere personal quirk. It reflected the religious experience on which all his preaching were based. Before justification by faith alone was a fully formulated doctrine, it was an overwhelming encounter with God's redeeming power. Luther and many other evangelicals after him felt that this encounter turned their lives upside down. This was why William Tyndale described justifying faith as 'feeling faith' – and why Thomas More mocked him for it.²

Luther's view that subjective experiential states were of decisive theological importance arose directly from his own experience. He discovered an inner conviction, which he took to be a gift from God, that he was predestined to be saved by the irrevocable gift of faith which God had graciously chosen to give him. This led him, from very early in his public career, to teach a stark doctrine of assurance. He only gradually softened his language as it became plain that not everyone shared this experience, and that his *assurance* was too easily mistaken by his opponents for *presumption*. Like his lifelong struggles with another of his vital theological categories, *Anfechtung* or diabolically-inspired despair, this is unmistakably a theology of experience rather than of disinterested reflection. Not that we attain justification through achieving a particular emotional state, but, rather, certain subjective states, such as assurance or *Anfechtung*, testify by their own nature – secretly, but plainly and unmistakably – that they are spiritual in origin, the work of God's grace or of the devil's assaults.

This became a systematic part of Luther's thinking in his famous distinction between theologies of the cross and of glory. For Luther, who was in love with paradox throughout his career, a 'theology of glory' was a snare and a deception: a theology which glorifies the theologian, or which teaches the Christian to seek glory. But only the Devil offers glory; Christ offers penalties, death and many tribulations. That is, one of the marks of authentic Christian discipleship is the experience of suffering. Generations of suffering Protestants finding renewed reserves of strength in the conviction that their sufferings were a sign of God's favour. Conversely, some Protestants who found themselves in safety, including Luther himself, were alarmed that this might be a terrible divine judgement on them.³ Suffering could not have merit in God's eyes, as was possible in Catholicism, but a theology of the cross meant that it could instead be a means of following in Christ's footsteps.

What made the reformers' doctrines powerful, in other words, was the emotional punch they could pack. In particular, justification by faith alone, once properly grasped, could be heady stuff indeed. It is worth reading early accounts of the doctrine, not for the formal logic of their argument, but for the vertiginous, almost weightless sense of liberation that hangs about them. Luther in 1520 described the Word of God as the source of 'life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing'. The Christian who has learned 'to recognize his helplessness and [who] is distressed about how he might satisfy the law' is 'truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes'. As such, this believer's soul abandons works-righteousness and instead clings to God's promises, such that it

² Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster et al. (The Complete Works of St Thomas More vol. 8. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), II.742.

³ David Bagchi, 'Luther and the Problem of Martyrology' in Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Studies in Church History vol. 30: Oxford, 1993), 209-20.

will be so closely united with them and altogether absorbed by them that it not only will share in all their power but will be saturated and intoxicated by them. If a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word.⁴

That is a description of eschatological hope, but it is also hard to see it as anything other than direct testimony of Luther's own experience.

Not all Protestants shared these experiences, but they were widely enough shared to provide an emotional 'script', which ministers who laid out what conversion and the Christian life ought to be could recommend to their people, and which believers could attempt to follow. In order to turn one professor's experience of grace into a church which could function for entire communities, Luther's experience had to be institutionalised. This was not straightforward. The emotional register of much Lutheran preaching was apparently warm, its focus on finding consolation in and nurturing gratitude for Christ's sufferings.⁵ Yet inevitably it became prescriptive. The bitter split in later sixteenth century Lutheranism, between 'Philippist' and 'Gnesio-Lutheran' parties, was in one sense over precisely this issue. 'Gnesio-Lutherans' fought their corner so hard because of their determination to preserve Luther's paradoxical, overwhelming experience of grace as normative, against the brackish, Calvinistic rationalism which they believed had seeped into Philip Melancthon's thinking. Hence, for example, the Gnesio-Lutheran Matthias Flacius Illyricus' ill-considered claim in 1560 that humanity had, at the Fall, been entirely transformed, such that our souls no longer bear God's image but are sinful in their very essence. As a matter of theology this was rash, and his opponents made hay with it. That very rashness, however, betrays the emotional depth of the Gnesio-Lutheran commitment to original sin, and thus to the experience of utter dependence on a God whose grace alone could save.⁶ By contrast, the cool reasonableness of the Philippists, always readier to debate and to compromise than to lay down their lives for their faith, felt to Gnesio-Lutherans like a theology of glory.

Experiencing predestination

That battle for Lutheranism's soul was part of a deeper split in the Protestant world, between Lutheranism and the Reformed ('Calvinist') Protestantism to which Philippists were accused of leaning. This split is fundamental to the history of early Protestantism, but remains frustratingly difficult to define. There is reliable a doctrinal litmus-test: Lutherans believed that Christ's body and blood are physically, corporally and objectively present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, whereas Reformed Protestants did not. That is an important disagreement, to which we shall return, but it is not in itself sufficient to explain the profundity and bitterness of the Lutheran-Reformed split. That split is best defined as a matter of mood and spirituality rather than of doctrine. Those differences are nowhere plainer than in the different experiences of justification by faith.

The Protestant doctrine of predestination argued that, since human beings are unable to save ourselves, it is purely God's choice whether or not to save us, a choice which we cannot influence and are powerless to resist. This doctrine, now so closely associated with

⁴ Martin Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian' in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 279, 283-4.

⁵ Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 96-8.

⁶ Robert Kolb, *Luther's Heirs Define His Legacy: Studies on Lutheran Confessionalisation* (Variorum: Aldershot, 1996), I.8-9.

Calvinism, was in fact advanced forcefully by Luther himself from the beginning of his public career, whereas Zwingli was cool towards it. In the generation that followed, those positions were reversed. Melancthon rounded the sharp edges of Luther's doctrine. Calvin, by contrast, developed a yet more rigorous variant, and it was thanks to him that predestination became a central part of Reformed Protestantism's experiential landscape.

Calvinist predestination was never unchallenged. There were Calvin's Genevan opponents Jerome Bolsec and Sebastian Castellio; Moyse Amyraut's attempt to square the circle with a doctrine of 'hypothetical universalism', which badly split the French Reformed church in the mid-seventeenth century; the Dutch disciples of Jacob Arminius, whose 'Remonstrance' against predestination took the Netherlands to the brink of civil war in the 1610s; and the English Arminians, who helped to take all three British kingdoms over that brink in the 1640s. All of these anti-predestinarians' arguments were, plainly, were driven by a more visceral moral revulsion at the doctrine, which they blamed for fostering anarchic libertinism, lethal spiritual pride and complacency, and crushing despair. Their quarrel was not primarily with Calvin's theological reasoning as with his intolerable conclusion.

Yet this is not a case of soggy Arminian wishful thinking versus clear-sighted Calvinist rationalism. Calvinist predestination stood against the revulsion of its enemies for so long because it, too, had a powerful emotional appeal. It helped to underline Calvinism's almost rapturous emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God, and it could serve to counterbalance the Reformed emphasis on sin and repentance, which might otherwise become overpowering.⁷ It also proved itself in practice in the face of persecution, when predestination can be liberating. You do not need to worry about standing firm in the faith when the torturer comes, since your salvation is in God's hands, not your own. God's grace is irresistible and predestined believers can never lose their salvation: you are beyond the devil's reach. During the Marian persecution in 1550s England, one recent convert to predestination enthused that the doctrine 'so cheereth our hearts and quickeneth our spirits that no trouble or tyranny executed against us can dull or discomfort the same'.⁸ Even in outwardly peaceful times, predestination could be a doctrinal expression of a felt reality, that is, that your salvation is utterly, wonderfully out of your own sinful hands. And this could be true of nations as well as individuals. The Calvinists who proposed the so-called 'Dutch Israel' thesis or who suggested that 'God is English' were not merely venting chauvinism, but reflecting that God's past mercy for and loving discipline of those nations showed that they had a special place in his covenanted purposes.⁹

In one important strand of Calvinism, this exploration of predestination's emotional power became central to the experience of being Protestant as a whole. This strand is often called 'Puritanism' but is more accurately described as 'experimental Calvinism'. It originated amongst pastoral theologians in England and Scotland; their works were then widely translated and then emulated, first by Dutch and then by German, French, Hungarian and Swedish Calvinists in the seventeenth century; and their tradition was a decisive influence on the Pietism of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, *The practise of pietie* (1612), a devotional manual by the English bishop Lewis Bayly (c. 1575-1631), had by 1750 had run through over eighty editions in English, at least 68 in German

⁷ Karant-Nunn, *Reformation of Feeling*, 128-30.

⁸ Thomas S. Freeman, 'Dissenters from a dissenting church: the challenge of the Freewillers, 1550-1558' in Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (eds), *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151-2.

⁹ Paul Regan, 'Calvinism and the Dutch Israel thesis' in Bruce Gordon (ed.), *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. II (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 91-106; John Aylmer, *An harborowe for faithfull and trewe subiectes* (London: John Day, 1559), sig. P4v.

and 51 in Dutch, and smaller numbers in other languages from Romanian to Welsh. This tradition discovered that Calvinist predestination made for immensely rich emotional soil in which to dig. *Rich* does not necessarily mean *comforting*.¹⁰ Even the despairing, however, found that predestination's ability to act as a prism through which all religious experience could be analysed and interpreted to be compelling. And for many believers – perhaps for most – despair was not the end of the story. Indeed, it was usually understood as a necessary prelude to conversion. 'It is not possible to you to make much of heaven,' warned the barnstorming Scottish preacher Robert Bruce (1554-1631), 'except you have had some taste of hell.'¹¹ Only when believers despair over their utter inability to save themselves can they receive grace. In this sense, it was *only* by embracing a wholesome despair that true assurance could be found.

That paradox was the gateway to an all-absorbing spirituality, whether we see it as a many-mansioned house for the believing soul or as a hall of mirrors. Fear of damnation was only part of the mix. The 'conscience-literature' which predestinarian pastoral theologians churned out for their flocks was built on another central paradox. Concern for your salvation is a sign of the Holy Spirit working in you, whereas 'security', or nonchalant disregard for spiritual matters, is a sign of damnation. Therefore, the less 'secure' you feel, the better your true spiritual condition. Although this paradox could not stop believers from sliding to either end of the see-saw, its logic relentlessly pulled them back to the fulcrum. You might take comfort from your own discomfort, but then be unsettled by your own inner peace. The constant effort required to maintain this balance was once linked by Max Weber to the emergence of the 'spirit of capitalism', on the grounds that such Calvinists lived a life of 'systematic self-control' in which 'hard, continuous bodily or mental labour' was the only route to even fleeting spiritual peace. However, Weber's argument was based on his assumption that Calvinists focused only on the outward evidence of regenerate lives, rather than the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. If that was true of anyone, it was certainly not true of Anglo-Scottish 'experimental Calvinism'.¹² The result, therefore, was less relentless worldly labour than continuous effort to maintain a height of spiritual ardour.

This could still be exhausting. For one English preacher, the Christian's predicament was like being stuck at the bottom of a well, needing to 'straine his voyce, as much as hee could' to call out to God.¹³ Yet the stakes were often lower than that alarming analogy suggests. Believers who watched themselves for sinfulness and signs of backsliding might do so because they feared they were not, after all, predestined to be saved. But the conscience-literature assured them that the very fact of their fear proved the fear to be groundless. More commonly, believers watched for sin because they were heartstruck with shame and sorrow when they grieved their God.¹⁴ Or again, while the conscience-literature taught that God speaks to believers through their emotions, it also taught they are not an infallible guide. You might, for example, not experience any kind of settled sense of assurance, but instead feel only momentary flashes of grace. That was enough. 'Had you euer any assurance of saluation in all your life?' asked the bestselling English conscience-writer Robert Linaker in 1595. 'Did you euer feelee the power of true Repentance in your soule?' If the answer to either question

¹⁰ A case made most forcibly by John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1991).

¹¹ Robert Bruce, *Sermons Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1591), sig. I3r-v.

¹² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992), 114-15, 158.

¹³ Nicholas Bownde, *Medicines for the plague that is, godly and fruitfull sermons vpon part of the twentieth Psalme* (London: A. Islip and F. Kingston for C. Burbie, 1604), 131, 133.

¹⁴ Leif Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590-1640* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

was yes, that was grounds enough for comfort.¹⁵ Whereas if the answers were no, that in itself might provide the necessary emotional jolt. One seventeenth-century Englishwoman testified that ‘through grief that I could not sorrow enough, I have fallen into a great measure of weeping’, and found comfort in the fact.¹⁶

Even if your heart remained stubbornly unmoved, that too could be a source of comfort. For experimental Calvinists met God in their feelings, but also knew he could transcend and indeed work against those feelings. The shrewdest and most influential theologian in this tradition, William Perkins (1558-1602), insisted in a posthumously-published work that emotion is merely a support which God sometimes gives to faith, not faith itself. ‘We must not live by feeling, but by faith.’ God can save his chosen people without giving them emotional guarantees of the fact, and to believe this and find assurance in it is indeed one of the highest forms of faith.¹⁷ This observation might seem to cut the ground out from under experimental Calvinism, but in fact reinforced it. For now it was possible to argue if you felt rejected by God, the truth might be the exact opposite. After all, axiomatically, the devil leaves the damned sleeping in sweet security and only stirs up turmoil and horrors in those whom he fears he might lose. Or perhaps such feelings were God disciplining those whom he loves. According to the Scottish bishop and devotional writer William Cowper (1568-1619), God says, ‘If I close the doore of my chamber upon thee, it is not to hold thee out, but to learn thee to knock.’¹⁸ It is by apparently opposing us, and by withholding his gifts, that God trains us in faith and righteousness.

God, therefore, loves us by appearing to abandon us: and we return this love by rejecting his abandonment. The spiritual life could therefore consist of a kind of warfare with God, in which God feints disapproval while at the same time challenging and arming believers to overcome him. In prayer, Christians should refuse to take *no* for an answer – indeed should take *no* as an encouragement, an unspoken promise of grace if they redoubled their efforts and persisted to the end. They should argue with God, citing Bible verses like a prison-house lawyer in order to compel him finally to give them the gifts that they knew he always intended to. They should wrestle with God in prayer like the patriarch Jacob, refusing to release him from that violent embrace until he gives them the blessing they seek.¹⁹ *Wrestling* became a clichéd metaphor for prayer, but some sought to deploy further weapons against God. The English poet George Herbert, an orthodox although subtle predestinarian, defined prayer as an ‘Engine against th’Almightie’.²⁰ His contemporary Samuel Torshell, preaching at a fast day called to avert a plague epidemic, called his hearers

to fight with God’s weapons, against God’s judgements. Fasting days are days of pitched battle; God fights, and the Supplicants fight; prayers are the shafts, which are delivered flying to heaven.²¹

We do not need to approve of the spiritual experiences which these sources describe to recognise their power.

¹⁵ Robert Linaker, *A comfortable treatise, for the reliefe of such as are afflicted in conscience* (London: W. Stansby for John Parker, 1620), 25.

¹⁶ Vavasor Powell, *Spirituell Experiences, Of sundry Beleevers* (London: Robert Ibbitson, 1653), 78.

¹⁷ William Perkins, *The first part of The cases of conscience* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1604), 104-5. On Perkins, see now W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ William Cowper, *A Most Comfortable and Christian Dialogue, betweene the Lord, and the Soule* (London: T. Snodham for John Budge, 1611), 32, 50.

¹⁹ Genesis 32:24-30.

²⁰ George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 51.

²¹ Samuel Torshell, *The Saints Humiliation* (London: John Dawson for Henry Overton, 1633), 1.

We should not, however, be unduly distracted by these emotional fireworks. Distress and conflict attracted the most attention from pastors and generated the greatest paper-trail from troubled believers, but even in this tradition, settled, nourishing assurance was a lived reality as well as a tantalising mirage. There was a gendered element to this: it is men's rather than women's life-stories which tend to emphasise spectacular falls into sin and heroic wrestling with God. Perhaps because early modern society did not allow women's sins to be so easily shrugged off, it tends to be amongst women, such as the Northamptonshire gentlewoman and diarist Elizabeth Isham, that we find alternative narratives, of quiet and gradual awakenings to faith rather than dramatic conversions.²² Not exclusively so, however. Theologies of conversion which demanded set-piece battles with despair repeatedly ran up against believers whose experiences did not fit the pattern. Some English Baptists shook themselves free of the Calvinist prescription of despair. This split between a prescribed experience of salvation and a more freewheeling readiness to accept that God might lead different individuals by different routes persisted into the Pietist revival. Classic Lutheran Pietism of the kind institutionalised by August Hermann Francke's University of Halle taught a regular *ordo salutis*, in which the approved route to salvation passed through a series of set-piece spiritual struggles. The Moravians of the 1720s and 1730s, by contrast, disparaged this 'self-induced sickness'. Their experience taught them that simple, imaginative identification with Christ allowed them to bypass the Pietist prescriptions. The Moravian leader Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf commented wryly that 'a Pietist cannot be converted in so cavalier a way as we can. ... We ride and the Pietists go on foot.'²³ It should be added that the Pietists would also not have veered as cavalierly as did the Moravians into such weirdly baroque spiritual practices as crawling imaginatively into the spear-wound in Christ's side.

The stages of life

If our understanding of how the Protestant experience varied between the genders is slowly becoming richer, our sense of how it varied with age remains badly under-developed. The stereotypical experience of conversion, which was normally held to be normative for the remainder of life, was placed in adolescence or early adulthood.²⁴ Children's religious experience, in particular, is a badly under-researched field. One reason for this neglect is that Protestant theologians, ministers and authors at the time also neglected them, generally assuming that children were sunk in sin. They also, however, reviled the 'Anabaptist' doctrine that baptism could be restricted to those who made a mature profession of faith, and thus were committed to children's membership of the visible church. The question, given that they denied that baptism was of itself efficacious for salvation, was what such membership meant. Luther's boldly idiosyncratic argument was that, since faith is a gift from God rather than an act of the human will or intellect, God may give it to whomsoever he wishes regardless of age, and he cited the unborn John the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb at the sound of the Virgin Mary's voice to prove that true faith can even precede birth.²⁵ For Reformed Protestants, the answer turned instead on the doctrine of covenant: believers'

²² Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 434-6; Kate Narveson, 'Resting Assured in Lay Piety: The Lay Experience', in Alec Ryrie and Tom Schwanda (eds), *Puritanism and Emotion in the Early Modern World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

²³ W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 136-7.

²⁴ See the pioneering discussion in Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation of the Generations: Youth, Age and Religious Change in England, c. 1500-1700', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. 21 (2011), 93-121.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1958), 242.

children might not, yet, be believers themselves, but they were children of the covenant. The result was a peculiar bifurcation in attitudes towards children's sin and salvation. Some children – especially healthy ones, older ones or 'children' in the abstract rather than one's own son or daughter – were assumed to be hardened sinners, little packages of Augustinian depravity in need of sharp correction until such time as it might please God to awaken them to their perilous condition. Other children – one's own children, the very young, the dangerously sick and, above all, the very many who died in childhood – were assumed to be the simple recipients of God's mercy. Death itself was a sure sign of that mercy, as it meant a swift escape from the miseries of this world. Even England's experimental-Calvinist culture was apparently suspended when it came to sick and dying children. Even impeccably orthodox Calvinist parents 'invariably assumed' that their dead children were Heaven-bound, and found genuine consolation from the fact.²⁶

If adults' experiences of childhood religion were contradictory, children's experience itself is almost beyond recovery. What we have, at present at least, is disconnected anecdotes: vivid but often highly idiosyncratic incidents and narratives of childhood faith. During our period these tended to be treated by the adult world as exceptional precocity.²⁷ It is only with the child-led revivals which became common in the eighteenth century that this picture changes.²⁸ Stereotypically, conversion, like the drawn-out battles with despair which accompanied it, was a matter for young adults, on the cusp of life-changes such as leaving home, marrying or – for a few select boys – attending university. The religious patterns set in those years tended to persist for the rest of life, then as now. During the first half of the sixteenth century this meant that religious change was in some sense a generational conflict, so much so that the Reformation itself has been described as a youth movement.²⁹ Even when this moment had passed, it is still worthwhile paying attention to generational change, as cohorts with radically different religious experiences succeeded one another.

Mortality patterns in this period ensured that old age was far less common than youth, although not exactly rare. Detailed testimonies of religious experience from the elderly are still all too rare, perhaps because many reporters felt the story was no longer dramatic enough to warrant regular updates. Some, perhaps many, ageing Protestants settled into a less agonised and perhaps more mature faith. The long quest for settled assurance could find its safe harbour in the quiet waters of old age. The 'private exercises' which the English devotional writer Richard Willis published at the age of 75 are so full of settled joy that his most recent commentator imagines him 'putting down his quill and leaving his prayer closet humming a psalm and beaming with beneficence'.³⁰

However, the final confrontation with sickness and death, which could of course strike at any age, was another matter. Here, again, confessional moods appear to have pulled apart. The Lutheran deathbed was stereotypically attended by spiritual comfort and consolation, emphasising, in the confessional era, the doctrine (which Calvinists denied) that Christ died for all, not merely for the elect. The Calvinist death-bed was, accordingly to clerical rhetoric at least, a more rigorous and testing arena, in which the dying were expected to follow the penitential script to the end. Yet this too had its comforts, since the scripted battle with the devil and with despair led to a scripted triumph, a testimony of salvation

²⁶ Hannah Newton, *The Sick Child in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 153; Alec Ryrie, 'Facing Childhood Death in Puritan Spirituality' in Katie Barclay, Ciara Rawnsley, and Kimberley Reynolds (eds), *Small Graves: Death, Emotion and Childhood in the Early Modern Period* (forthcoming 2016).

²⁷ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 428-436; Ryrie, 'Facing Childhood Death'.

²⁸ Ward, *Protestant Evangelical Awakening*.

²⁹ Susan Brigden, 'Youth and the English Reformation' in *Past and Present* no. 95 (1982), 37-67.

³⁰ Narveson, 'Resting Assured in Lay Piety', 189.

which could bring comfort to companions and mourners, and perhaps even to the dying themselves.³¹

Doctrine and emotion

The emotional scripts and experiences which clustered around the Protestant doctrines of salvation are an important clue to a wider priority. In reading the Reformation era's polemical and theological works, we need to focus on their emotional heft as well as their intellectual origins, logical consistency or rhetorical effectiveness. This means distinguishing between stage arguments which may be logically central but which never truly persuaded anyone, and the arguments and assumptions which seem to have formed the emotional heart of the writer's own convictions. These arguments may be poorly articulated, and may be more visceral than logical. They are often distinguished by vivid language rather than by subtle reasoning. Yet they are vital if we are to understand why so many early modern people were convinced that certain points of doctrine were worth dying for and killing for.

Take, for example, the most divisive Reformation-era controversy, those over the Eucharist. We now understand the doctrines and the shades of difference between them tolerably well, but not the deeper question of why these differences mattered so very much to so many people.³² Why did both Protestants find the Mass intolerable, rather than simply erroneous? And why did Lutherans find the Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist at least as offensive, whereas most Reformed writers were willing to be indulgent towards the Lutheran doctrines which they saw as erroneous? To look at these questions from the perspective of religious experience is to ask what work the different views did for believers in their spiritual lives. Take, for example, Lutheranism's so-called consubstantial doctrine, which argues that Christ's body and blood are physically present in the elements while those elements yet remained bread and wine (as opposed to transubstantiation, in which only the elements are fully transformed in their inner substance and only retain the outward appearance of bread and wine). Was the appeal of this that it was analogous to Christ's incarnation, in which he had become fully human while remaining fully divine? Or was that argument itself an *ex post facto* rationalisation of a simple experience of Christ's presence in the sacrament and the assurance it brought?

The Reformed insistence that Christ is *not* physically present in the elements had a different appeal. The English polemicist Thomas Broke, amidst a tedious procession of stock arguments for a firmly non-realist Eucharistic doctrine, let slip what he found unacceptable about both the Lutheran and the Catholic doctrines: they taught that 'every man which receiveth the sacrament, receiveth also the natural body of Christ: be he never so wicked and unfaithful'. That was not simply an error, but an intolerable profanation. Likewise, he and many other Reformed commentators rejected a physical presence, not because they found the Aristotelian logic of scholastic theology wanting, but because their gorge rose with an almost visceral revulsion at a doctrine which amounted to deicidal cannibalism, in which Christ gives believers 'parcels, and gobbets of his natural, and bodily flesh to eat with their teeth'.³³ Reginald Scot, who was as dismissive of Catholicism as he famously was of witchcraft, wrote that Catholics

³¹ Karant-Nunn, *Reformation of Feeling*, 195-214; Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 460-8.

³² Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³³ Thomas Broke, *Certeyn meditations, and thinges to be had in remembraunce* (London: W. Seres for J. Day, 1548), sigs A3v, A5v.

are not ashamed to swear, that ... they eat [Christ] up raw, and swallow down into their guts every member and parcel of him: and last of all, that they convey him into the place where they bestow the residue of all that which they haue devoured.³⁴

That is not an argument; it is a gag reflex. But it may betray where the roots of Eucharistic controversy lay more truly than any sophisticated theology.

This is not to say that every doctrinal controversy was a mere disguise for baser urges or for inarticulable religious experiences. Rather, it means we must treat the emotional and experiential dimension of theological controversy much as we have long treated the socio-economic dimension. That means that we should not treat ideas crudely, as if they were window-dressing for conflicts which were not in fact about what the participants thought they were about. Yet nor should we treat ideas naively, dismissing the way unspoken concerns can decisively shape conflicts. In particular, we consistently need to ask not only what the substance of a particular theological dispute was, but why that dispute mattered to the people involved. How the face value of a doctrinal issue might relate to its beating heart will vary from issue to issue, from time to time, from community to community and, sometimes, from individual to individual. Yet if we are to make any sense of how the religious conflicts of the age unfolded, this is perhaps *the* fundamental question.

The experience of believing

If the perspective of spiritual experience is necessary for understanding the impact of Protestantism's most fundamental doctrine, justification by faith alone, it is necessary in a different way for understanding the working of its most fundamental theological method, the appeal to Scripture alone.

At the Diet of Worms, Luther took his stand not on one but on two linked authorities. His conscience, he insisted, was captive to the word of God, and as such he dared not defy it. No other interpreter had the power to bind or to correct his conscience. It was this closed appeal to what he himself had seen in Scripture, regardless of whether anyone else had seen it, which led the archbishop of Trier's secretary, in the Diet's initial response to Luther's statement, to declare that 'you are completely mad'.³⁵ In fact the truth was worse. Luther was making his own perception of reality an authority against which there was no appeal, a stand analogous to Galileo's claim a century later that he knew Jupiter had moons because he had seen them with his own eyes. The truth was, to him, self-evident, and no appeal to authority could override it. If the same truth was not self-evident to others, that was their loss, but could hardly shake his own faith.

This became common ground for all Reformation traditions. However, the so-called 'magisterial' reformers – the Lutheran and Reformed theologians who hoped to create universal churches – sharply distinguished their approach from that of the 'radical' reformers, sometimes misleadingly labelled 'Anabaptists'. The magisterial reformers insisted that they sought authority in plain Scripture, which was open to all, whereas the radicals stood instead on the shifting sands of spiritualism and prophecy, making claims that no-one could test or challenge. Yet if we press the magisterial doctrine of 'scripture alone', the distinction blurs. Luther's dictum that Christ is the lord and king of Scripture not only allowed him to be dismissively cavalier about inconvenient Biblical texts, from the epistle of James to the deuterocanonical Scriptures in their entirety, on the grounds that they did not preach Christ.

³⁴ Reginald Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft* (London, 1584), 191.

³⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 113.

It also provided him with an interpretative key to govern the interpretation of Scripture as a whole. This did not necessarily mean that his enemies were right to accuse him of twisting the text to suit his preconceived meaning. Rather, he was applying the well-established hermeneutical method of using Scripture as its own interpreter. He had learned his doctrines from Scripture, and having done so, used those doctrines to interpret the rest of Scripture. It was a respectable means of proceeding, but it was based on an almost revelatory insight. As Scott Hendrix has argued:

The authority of Scripture for Luther was not like a mathematical theorem which can be proven true for all by the use of self-evident axioms. ... Luther approached Scripture as we would approach a great work of art. ... Only as we struggle to understand the work of art, and bring to it the tools necessary to interpret it aright, and receive some of the same inspiration which the artist himself enjoyed in creating it, will the external claim of that work to be authoritative validate itself in our life.³⁶

‘Scripture alone’, in this sense, is no less experiential a doctrine than ‘faith alone’.

Luther did not attempt to prove the authority of Scripture, but Calvin, being a systematician, could not evade the subject. The relevant passage in the *Institutes*, however, simply refuses to advance an argument. ‘We ought,’ he insists when asserting the Bible’s authority, ‘to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgements or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.’ We will find this testimony ‘if we turn pure eyes and upright senses towards [Scripture, and] the majesty of God will immediately come to view.’ That makes it sound inexorable, but he admits that it is not. ‘The Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.’ Therefore, ‘Scripture is indeed self-authenticating. ... We *feel* [‘non dubiam’] that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there, ... a *feeling* [‘sensus’] that can be born only of heavenly revelation. I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself.’³⁷ And by extension, of what each unbeliever does not experience. Like a work of art, or an astronomical phenomenon, Scripture’s authority depends on empirical experience rather than logic and argument. You either feel it or you do not.

The achievement of magisterial Protestant theology was to take this experiential doctrine of Scripture and build on it complex, effective doctrinal structures that were able to be grounded in the text with no need for further authorities. Many Protestant radicals, from the early Anabaptists to the Quakers, were either unable to match that achievement or had no wish to. The radicals typically did not depend on direct, extra-Biblical revelation, but cited the Spirit to justify their readings of Scripture, so putting those interpretations beyond the reach of sceptical questioning. The early Anabaptist polemicist Hans Hergot called learned theologians ‘Scripture wizards’, who ‘have kidnapped the Holy Spirit and won’t release him’. The Anabaptist leader Hans Hut warned that Scripture can only be understood ‘through the goodness and mercy of the Holy Spirit’. ‘Many accept the Scriptures as if they were the essence of divine truth,’ cautioned Hut’s disciple Jorg Haugk, ‘but they are only a witness to divine truth which must be experienced in the inner being.’³⁸ Over a century later, the nebulous English sect known as the Ranters supposedly distinguished between the ‘history’

³⁶ Scott Hendrix, *Tradition and Authority in the Reformation* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), II, 147.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 78-81 (my emphasis); cf. John Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis* (Geneva: Robert I Estienne, 1559), 16.

³⁸ Walter Klaassen, Frank Friesen and Werner O. Packull (eds), *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2001), 19, 24, 45.

of Scripture – its dead letter – and the ‘mystery’ of Scripture, its inner meaning which had been revealed to them.³⁹ These views could become nakedly self-serving and were anathema to respectable Protestant theology. Yet that theology was itself ultimately grounded on a not dissimilar claim.

The point is not that magisterial Protestantism’s theological edifice was built on shaky foundations, but, on the contrary, that the experiential mode of encountering Scripture remained primary for most Protestants most of the time. The daily devotional lives of Protestant believers were soaked in the Biblical text, whether memorised, transcribed, expounded, paraphrased, or simply read, aloud and silently, collectively and individually. Neither the ministers who prescribed such exercises, still less the laypeople who undertook them, saw their primary purpose as training the population up in theological controversy. Most churches actively discouraged adventurous laypeople from engaging in independent doctrinal reasoning based on their Bible reading. Quotidian Bible-reading, part of the bedrock of Protestant spiritual experience, was devotional in nature and was closely aligned to the experiential encounter with the Spirit through the Word which Luther and Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture implied.

And yet the religious experience of lay Protestant Bible-readers remains elusive. Bible-reading may indeed have acted as a leveller, by allowing lay men and women of only modest education to encounter the sacred text. One important study of English women’s Bible-reading suggests that their experience was much less strongly gendered than we might have imagined.⁴⁰ But this is only one facet of a wider problem, namely the bias both of our sources and of our historiography towards debate and polemic, and away from the often non-discursive lived reality of devotional experience. We know a great deal now, for example, about the emotional culture which Reformation preachers were trying to inculcate; the study of the lay person’s experience of such sermons remains much less developed.⁴¹ The devotional experience of Protestant worship is still mysterious. One recent study concluded, plausibly, that ‘prolonged exposure to Lutheran worship ... played a key role, both in the establishment of discipline, and in the education of the laity in matters of belief.’⁴² Actually reconstructing the sensory experience of such worship and its somatic effects is another matter.⁴³ Music is an important part of the story, as both Reformed psalmody and Lutheran hymnody could mobilise and involve whole congregations in worship in new ways – although, once again, the clergy’s perspective is far clearer than the laity’s.⁴⁴ The religious experience of the laity outside church buildings is harder still. The material culture of everyday Protestant life remains a badly under-explored subject: as one powerful recent study of Protestant domestic interiors in England and Scotland suggests, even Reformed

³⁹ A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 82.

⁴⁰ Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Religious Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

⁴¹ For the former, see Karant-Nunn, *Reformation of Feeling*; for the latter, Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴² P. J. Broadhead, ‘Public Worship, Liturgy and the Introduction of the Lutheran Reformation in the Territorial Lands of Nuremberg’ in *English Historical Review* vol. 120 no. 486 (2005), 302.

⁴³ Some of these issues are addressed in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (ed.), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): see especially John Craig’s article, ‘Psalms, groans and dogwhippers: the soundscape of worship in the English parish church, 1547-1642’.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Daniel Trocmé-Latter, *The Singing of the Strasbourg Protestants, 1523-1541* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Beth Quitslund, *The Reformation in Rhyme: Sternhold, Hopkins and the English Metrical Psalter, 1547-1603* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); and a classic article, W. Stanford Reid, ‘The Battle Hymns of the Lord: Calvinist Psalmody of the Sixteenth Century’ in *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 2 (1971), 36-54.

Protestantism was much less 'iconophobic' than its polemicists might lead us to believe.⁴⁵ The natural world, too, had a powerful part to play in religious experience.⁴⁶

All of which is to say: the nature of Protestant spiritual experience remains, to a remarkable extent, an undiscovered country. It is at least now clear how fundamental a question this is to any understanding of the Reformation. Mapping out that question, and beginning to tease out some answers, is one of the principal scholarly challenges before us.

⁴⁵ Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁴⁶ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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